

You woke up to a climate nightmare. Now what?

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Body

If you've followed headlines in the last month you may have heard about the flooding in New York. Or the flooding in Germany. Or the flooding in China. But residents of British Columbia were the subject of their own international climate headlines, as they suffered through one broken temperature record after another in this summer's heat dome.

For Canadians east of Alberta, the heat dome may not have felt so immediate. Unfortunately, the high temperatures supercharged fires. Smoke has blown all the way into southern Ontario, giving the noon horizon an eerie grey look that was more familiar when the province's coal power plants were still chugging in 2013.

For much of the world, the summer of 2021 represents a painful awakening to the reality of an unstable climate.

There are things you can do to live under these new conditions, but they aren't very appealing. You can wear the N95 mask you bought for COVID whenever you're outdoors - just make sure the nose wire is tightly fitted to keep out the toxic smoke particles. And if you're on the West Coast, you can buy an AC unit or move into a hotel during the next heat wave, as many B.C. residents scrambled to do this summer.

But if coexisting with a constantly deteriorating climate doesn't appeal to you, then I would recommend some actions to keep our planet habitable.

By now you probably know how to reduce your own carbon footprint: switch to an electric vehicle (or don't drive at all), eat more plants and less meat, avoid air travel, install heat pumps in your home if you can. Recycling is nice - but as citizens we need to graduate beyond the elementary school basics and start doing more.

Those larger lifestyle choices are important. However, the latest research suggests that the most effective actions may be the political ones.

So start by voting for climate action. Vote for city officials who want active transport and dense urban areas. Vote for provincial and federal leaders who work to make polluting vehicles and power plants expensive - and renewable energy cheap. Volunteer for those candidates in their races and encourage your friends and family to vote for them. If you have money to give to climate efforts, analysis by my colleagues and me found that it's probably better to give to a climate-ambitious politician than a carbon offset fund.

The next Canadian federal election is not far off, and when it comes each of us will have a rare opportunity to affect emissions in greater quantities than lifestyle choices can normally achieve. My research found that winning voters in the last Canadian federal election were responsible for saving about 34 tonnes of CO2 each - 14 times more savings than a year without driving.

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Even when elections aren't happening, you can still influence politicians. Speak to elected officials on the phone or in personalized letters and emails. Snail mail to members of Parliament is postage free, their contact information is easy to find, and you don't need to be a voter to talk to them - just someone living in their riding.

Here is what works: In those letters and phone calls, tell your representatives how climate change has affected you personally. Let them know what it was like living through the heat dome in a building with no air conditioning. Explain how you had to buy an air purifier for wildfire smoke because you were having trouble breathing. Ask them to imagine Canada in 2085 when your toddler will be wanting to retire.

Once you're done, join a climate organization. They'll let you know when the next big climate strike or protest is going on so that you can join in. This is not throwing stuff at the wall and seeing what sticks - we have evidence that environmental protests drive down emissions.

Unprecedented heatwaves and the growing wildfire season are not flukes. Science shows us they are made worse by climate change. And just like there is research showing us the cause of the problem, there is research showing us how we can solve it. It's time to act on what we know.

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